

Homily – Growing Our Talents or Spiritual Gifts

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Our preacher and presider today was supposed to be the Rev. Jen Crompton. Jen has been a priest for less than a year, and they are both the Episcopal chaplain at Cal Poly and the community trailblazer at St. Benedict's Episcopal Church in Los Osos. Jen was going to tell us about both of those ministries so that we could soak in the activities of our wider church. However, Jen tested positive for Covid. We will reschedule Jen so they can come to St. Barnabas in the new year.

You may have noticed that I used the pronoun they with Jen, since Jen identifies as non-binary. According to Wikipedia, non-binary and gender queer are umbrella terms for gender identities that are not solely male or female. Non-binary identities fall under the transgender umbrella, since non-binary people typically identify with a gender that is different from their sex, though some non-binary people do not consider themselves transgender. Non-binary people may identify as an intermediate or separate third gender, identify with more than one gender, no gender, or have a fluctuating gender identity. Gender identity is separate from sexual or romantic orientation, so non-binary people have various sexual orientations. Being non-binary is also not the same as being intersex, since most intersex people identify as either male or female. Non-binary people as a group vary in their gender expression, and some may reject gender identity altogether. Some non-binary people are medically treated for gender dysphoria with surgery, or hormones, as trans men and trans women often are.

For many of you, this rather sterile, clinical definition of non-binary may be new information. I imagine that a goodly percentage of you don't have friends and acquaintances who are non-binary. Jen is much more than their gender identity, but part of what Jen shares with our church and world is their self. And, it is in rubbing elbows with others that we embrace the full diversity and beauty of God's creation. Jen could just hide under a bushel, but that is not what they do. So, next year when Jen is with us we will learn about ministry at Cal Poly, about what it means to be a community trailblazer, and about the gift that is Jen themselves.

Now, today's Gospel reading is known as the "Parable of the Talents." There is another version of this parable in the Gospel according to Luke, but today we are looking at Matthew's version. In this parable we have a man or master and we have three slaves or servants. Two of the slaves do well in the eyes of the man by earning more money or talents and the third slave is condemned by the man for burying the money and not providing an increase in the talents.

The traditional interpretation of this parable is that it is a lesson about money or wealth. The traditional interpretation seems to have Jesus supporting our twenty-first century views of capitalism and the accumulation of wealth. Sometimes we forget that capitalism is a modern way of thinking. Sometimes we forget that any economic system is a human invention. God does not support one economic system over another, but we know from the Bible and from Jesus that God wants any economic system to ensure compassion for all. We are to care for the widow and the orphan. We are to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. As followers of Jesus we know that any economic system must care for all. And, two thousand years ago, Jesus lived in an agrarian society that had no economic growth. If one person was to accumulate more wealth then it had to come from another person. Thus, it was considered gauche and crass to accumulate wealth and take from others. Two thousand years ago it was the third slave who did the proper thing. Two thousand years ago, the man and the first two slaves are the ones who went against the prevailing moral code of the day. So, what is going on with this teaching of Jesus? Is he just reinforcing the adage that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? I think not. So, let's look for another meaning to this parable that fits with love, wholeness, and union.

As followers of Jesus we often like to say that Jesus is the path. This second part of the Trinity, this God who became man is the path to salvation and eternal life. I certainly believe this is true, but Jesus is also a teacher of wisdom. He is the path, but he also reveals the path to us, and that path is always movement towards love, towards wholeness, towards union with God. Anything in the Bible, anything in the teachings of Jesus, anything in our spiritual journey that does not lead to love, wholeness and union is a distraction, and we must continue to sift through each of the teachings of Jesus until we see how they fit into love, wholeness and union.

So, there is a second traditional interpretation of today's parable that hinges on the word "talent." Two thousand years ago a talent was equal to twenty years of daily wages. So, it was a lot of money. But, today to us the word "talent" means something else. We define "talent" as a natural aptitude or skill. Synonyms include gift, knack, or ability. And, when we use this contemporary definition then the Parable of the Talents takes us on another path. In this way Jesus' parable means we are supposed to use and hone our natural aptitudes and skills. As followers of Jesus we believe that all of our blessings are gifts from God including the gift of our natural aptitudes and skills. The gift of piano playing is to be honed and improved. An aptitude with numbers is to be used to earn a daily wage. A skill with writing is to be used to help others grow. Talents are to be shared and grown. Our churches are especially dependent on the sharing of talents. With stewardship we don't just talk about money. Instead, we say that stewardship is the sharing of the time, talent, and treasure that has been gifted to us by God. So, perhaps Jesus is encouraging all of us

to share our talents with the church so that we can do all of those good things that a church is supposed to do. I guess in this way today's Parable is teaching us something that IS in line with love, wholeness, and union with God. Not much of a stretch to see how sharing of talents can lead to the good things. There is wisdom in this traditional interpretation of the parable, but I think there is even a better meaning. And, once you hear this, I hope you can never stop seeing it.

Now, I am one that believes God is unchanging. God doesn't change, but God does continue to reveal more and more about God. Two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, God came into the world as a baby boy that we know as Jesus. This is the biggest step change in our understanding of God, and it may be the biggest leap forward that occurs until the next coming of Jesus. In the meantime, I believe that God continues to try to move human beings, both as individuals and as a species, to a next level of consciousness. God continues to move human beings to an evolving understanding in which we see God in us. God is in you. God is in me. God is in each and every one of us. But, we do so much to deny and dampen this beauty. We cling to a false self that is based on fear, anger, and envy. Through Jesus, God reveals to us the path to move away from this false self and into the beauty that God intends for us.

As God continues to reveal more and more to us that knowledge builds on itself. It is cumulative and is always moving outward toward ever greater discovery. It is like a snowball rolling down a hill in which it keeps building on itself and rolling faster. This is the spiritual path that Jesus leads us on both with his being and by his teachings. Jesus shows us the way to love and wholeness, and these snowball into union with God. This is a union that is our birthright and our destiny. And in that union with God we grow into joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and grace. Isn't this a change of direction that you want in your life and in the lives of your loved ones? When we stop clinging to the past and an old shallow way of thinking and when we embrace change, then we begin participating in this future that God has in store for us.

I wonder if this is the meaning of today's Gospel reading. "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." This is a truism that fits with the realms of spirit and wisdom. Spirit and wisdom increase and evolve with use. They snowball down the hill. Conversely, things of this material world decrease with use. They dwindle away which is why our consumer worldview is unsustainable.

So, here are some questions about your life's journey and whether you have started snowballing down the hill. Are you spending time on your spiritual practices? Are

you talking to God? Are you listening for God? Are you studying the Bible and other meaningful resources? Are you watching the birds in the trees and digging in the soil? Are you mindful of your blessings and grateful for what you already have? Are you finding ways to serve others? Are you dancing with joyous abandon even when you are alone? There are a lot of ways to practice our spirituality and maybe, even with all the things going on in our world, it is time to double down on the realms of spirit and wisdom.

I believe that the Parable of the Talents is about the realms of spirit and wisdom. The more these realms are practiced, the more they snowball and pick up strength. The two who took action to increase their spiritual practices, gained much. God praised them and pointed out that they would be rewarded with more and more love, wholeness, and union with God. The one who buried his spirituality, gained nothing. God points out the peril and waste of this person's potential. Do you see it?

This is one of the reasons that I am grateful to Jen Crompton for the way they share themselves with us. Again, Jen could just bury their talent and self in the ground, but that is not what they do. Jen is brave and helps us all grow in a way that we see Christ in all and around all.

So, remember when a story or teaching in the Bible is not in alignment with love, wholeness and union, then it is a teaching that is not of God. Then, look for another meaning that is. In the same way when something of this world IS aligned with love, wholeness and union then it IS of God. I know that a lot of you here today are working hard at your spiritual journeys. You recognize the God who is already within you, and you help others do the same. YOU are honing your talents and evolving into union with God.